

The idea that stopping antiviral treatment for HIV for short spells can cut the amount of circulating virus by transiently reawakening the immune system seems to have been firmly knocked on the head. Researchers following a cohort of 97 patients after they underwent a series of structured treatment interruptions found that viral load, far from decreasing, simply returned to pretreatment levels. Treatment interruptions also reduced the killer T cell response to the virus in most people (www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.202372199).

In 1999, two cases from New York of encephalitis associated with muscle weakness led to a huge investigation that ultimately identified West Nile virus as the cause of ongoing outbreaks of disease in humans and crows. Severe cases have been described as Guillain-Barré type syndromes, but two further reports in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2002;347:1225-6) now say that West Nile virus can cause poliomyelitis, suggesting that the virus can directly attack motor neurones in the spinal cord.

A tenth of patients with dyspepsia present with alarm symptoms. But although alarm symptoms are said to predict a bad prognosis, a three year prospective study found they gave low positive predictive values and high negative predictive values. The authors say this reflects the low incidence of cancer and ulcers in the general population. Rather depressingly, most of those who did develop cancer or ulcers did not present with alarm symptoms at the initial consultation (*Scandinavian Journal of Gastroenterology* 2002;37:999-1007).

Do women have a hidden "on heat" period? A review of the field finds that most studies report no rise or change in male or female initiated sexual activity, women's sexual desire, or sexual arousability during the mid-follicular and late luteal phases of the menstrual cycle. On the other hand, studies looking at women's sense of smell and visual perception tend to indicate that mid-cycle is the time when even male sweat smells good and women prefer male faces that are masculinised and physically more attractive (*Human Reproduction* 2002;17:2243-8).

Readers of *Positive Nation*, a UK AIDS magazine, are being asked to vote for their HIV hero. The first Hero Award went to Elton John in 2002. The 2003 Hero Award will be chosen from a short list of eight people, but this time none of the nominees are celebrities. Their claim to non-fame is simply their unsung work in supporting

people with HIV in Britain. To view the nominees go to www.ukcoalition.org

The hygiene hypothesis proposes that declining exposure to infections is linked to the rising trend in asthma and allergy. Analysis of a huge population database in the United States supports the relation (*Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 2002;110:381-7). Data from the third national health and nutrition examination survey shows that serological evidence of certain infections—mostly foodborne—is associated with a lower probability of suffering from hay fever and asthma.

Over 4000 people have applied to join the United Kingdom's first Citizen's Council. The 30 councillors will be given the task of helping to influence decision making by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). The chairman of NICE believes this overwhelming response reflects the desire of ordinary members of the public to get directly involved in NHS decision making. Minerva thinks this is simply a device to take the heat off the professionals when unpopular decisions are made.

Surgeons in Turkey have been experimenting with using plastic syringes for finger splints. Apart from coming in a range of sizes that can be cut to fit any finger, their other advantages include cost, easy availability, weight, and ability to maintain immobilisation (with the ends of fingers remaining flexible, if desired). Also, they can be reused to minimise environmental harm. The downside is that each one has to be individually made (*Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 2002;110:1190-1).

The contribution that neurologists can make to patients with chronic back pain seems limited, according to a study in *European Neurology* (2002;48:61-4). Of 97 new patients seen over two years in one neurology clinic, two thirds had non-neurological conditions and were given treatment for their symptoms—as were those who fell into the neurological group. As pain clinics or surgical teams offer specialist pain management, and the rest can be overseen within primary care, the neurologist's input seems at best "symbolic."

Exercising seems more difficult in hot places than in more comfortable surroundings. To prove this, scientists manipulated the exercise-induced rise in body temperature of athletes by putting them in a climatic chamber and submerging them in a warm water bath. Not surprisingly, thermal stress



An 89 year old man on the rehabilitation unit gave a 12 month history of an eczematous non-healing skin lesion, which was gradually increasing in size, in his groin. It was initially thought to be a squamous cell carcinoma, but the biopsy showed extra-mammary Paget's disease. This is associated with internal malignancies, and it is essential to exclude urological and gastrointestinal disease. This patient is undergoing further investigations.

The treatment of choice for extra-mammary Paget's disease is wide local excision. Local recurrence is seen in about 50% of cases, so long term follow up is advised. In addition, distant metastases may occur, notably to the lung. I Ewington, senior house officer, N J Dudley, consultant, department of elderly medicine, St James's University Hospital, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Leeds LS9 7TF

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increased the stress of exercise both subjectively (personal perception) and objectively (heart rate variability) and through the secretion of stress hormones. All three influence the immune system (*Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness* 2002;42:368-78).

An obituary of Paul Freeling, a former professor of general practice who died last month, says that in his attitude to peers and patients he followed the advice he had given to his daughter. He told her she could be "the sort of person whom nobody will dislike and nobody remember. Or you can be disliked by some and loved by others" (*Times* 2002 September 25:36).